

LAXTON AND MOORHOUSE PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the Parish Council's Village Meeting held at 7.00 pm on Wednesday 22 September 2021 at The Village Hall, Laxton

To introduce the Thoresby Estate to the parish of Laxton and Moorhouse

The meeting opened at 7.15 pm when Mr Gregor Pierrepont introduced himself and the Thoresby Estate Trust as the new owners of the Laxton Estate having purchased it from the Crown Estate.

The village hall was full.

Mr Pierrepont's presentation and subsequent Q&A session focused on the following in particular:

1. The structure of the Thoresby Estate trust which is overseen by then trustees with Mr Pierrepont as the Chief Executive Officer and life tenant.
2. His regret that the opportunity to meet the whole community, including those indirectly affected by the ownership change, had been so delayed by the pandemic which had crossed with the transfer of ownership.
3. His recognition that, although the trust and its properties were the focus of all decisions made, those decisions had implications for the wider community and the trust did not want to ignore their concerns.
4. Thoresby Estate had been interested in purchasing the Laxton Estate because of existing personal connections in the form of ownership of land in Laxton and the desire actively to observe the statutory obligation to preserve the manorial institutions and open fields.
5. Inevitably, the Crown Estate had been a remote and distant landlord which had made little investment in the Laxton estate leaving a lot of the properties in poor condition and requiring extensive works. Covid 19 had then delayed the commencement of the works schedule. This is now underway but, of necessity, certain properties had had to be prioritised.
6. In addition to repairing and restoring the estate's assets, enhancing the Laxton Estate is also a priority. In enhancing Laxton, the trust is alive to the tension between keeping the village a living, working place rather than a tourist attraction and its special nature which should be shared and appreciated more widely. This, in turn, was linked to its future prosperity by raising awareness and appreciation of its unique and special nature. The trust is looking to achieve this by developing the estate and, in particular a new purpose built visitor centre, as an educational destination from primary age to higher education. This will take time and discussion is underway with the Visitor Centre trustees, NCC and others with regard to visitor facilities with a view to, with the parish council's support, producing and submitting a grant proposal for a scheme which increases and enhances the village's visitor facilities whilst avoiding commercialisation. Mr Pierrepont emphasised that all parties had a stake in the proposal which the trustees recognised would be a collective proposal on behalf of the whole community and not just the trust.
7. The trust is also looking to increase the level of retirement housing available in ten village for its residents. The provision of alms houses would allow older farmers to retire and remain in their village and community. These would not be a commercial development but would be run through a charitable entity. The trust is working with NSDC in this regard.
8. In addition, the trust supports a review of the conservation area to bring the open fields themselves within the conservation boundary. This would constitute further recognition

of Laxton's unique heritage. The trust is aiming for its tenant farmers to build viable post subsidy businesses which combine farming their relatively small acreage with on farm diversification into activities such as liveries, breweries and other complimentary rural businesses. All diversification would need to be effected in a way which observes the spirit and letter of the court leet. Mr Perrepoint referred to the operating model represented by the first new tenancy of the trust's ownership, explaining his hope that it will be a model for more.

9. Beyond all this, the trust is looking to work with other parties to promote the village and keep it viable.

The meeting then moved to the Q&A session. This focused on the following:

10. The new alms houses, their impact and appearance – The trust is working with NSDC with the alms houses likely to be a mix of redeveloped existing buildings and new build. The later will be necessary because of the shortage of existing single level, no step buildings.
11. How the trust plans to meet the demands of climate change – The trust had discussed this already with the farmers. In the absence of a final ELMs funding scheme, it had been difficult for the trust to plan appropriate landscape changes. The hope is that the ties inbuilt in ELMs will allow the trust to develop and landscape scale scheme specific to Laxton which would unlock significant funding. In any event, the trust will work with farmers and the court leet to devise a least worse system which preserves the open fields and provides a realistic income for the tenant farmers.
The trust recognises that it needs to secure the co-operation of the majority of its tenants. It intends to achieve this through discussion with the court leet but there is an argument that the court leet has a yet untested power of enforcement. The trust would not be aggressive but Mr Pierrepoint believes that the parliamentary undertaking and viability of the Laxton estate demand that the court leet has some teeth and uses them. However, this meeting was not the time to discuss that.
12. Trust plans to develop farm buildings – The trust is not in the business of selling and will not be splitting up farms. However, it supports the appropriate use of buildings as part of business diversification, such as Airbnb accommodation. Where a vacant tenancy arises, the trust would discuss the prospective tenant's business plans for the land and buildings. Where there were competing applications for a tenancy, the prospective extent of active involvement in and promotion of the open field system would be an important factor.
13. Trust plans for a collective Laxton brand – Mr Pierrepoint explained that any branding was downstream of a new visitor centre. The increase in visitor traffic and interest would create the profile which would underpin the brand, which was a medium to long term goal. In terms of a co-op, this would require a co-operative approach which historically had been difficult to achieve in Laxton. It would need to be led by the farmers and facilitated by the tenants which a need for volunteers to support any initiative. Mr Pierrepoint observed that the court leet is a form of co-operative.
14. The number of farms required to ensure that the Laxton estate is viable – Mr Pierrepoint explained that, working with various organisations, thirteen farms had been identified as the minimum number for a viable estate. This number would ensure a sufficient number of farms were being farmed actively and well. Too many more would impact on the viability of the individual farms. If the number could increase that would be welcomed but that possibility would be determined by commercial viability. He observed that there would be no point in splitting a successful farm into two and creating two vacancies which would need to be filled.
15. The support for farms which tenants were looking from the Thoresby Estate in contrast to their neglect by the Crown Estate – Mr Pierrepoint was clear that the trust would not support any proposal which undercut or compromised another part of the Thoresby Estate. The trust is looking to develop a complimentary portfolio of activity. It will not be the instigator but will support tenants who want to develop their businesses. As a

tenanted village, Laxton is unique and all its farmers are self employed. Inevitably, 120 are farms require some off farm work and the trust is here to support tenants in that regard.

16. The time line of each phase of the trust plan for the Laxton estate – Mr Pierrepont explained that a trust surveyor had been surveying the village during 2020 which had led to the production of an informed work schedule. This includes a plan for how long it will take to clear the backlog of repairs. This will not be a short time. In conjunction with the Visitor Centre, the trust is looking for significant progress over the next three to four years. Covid is proving a funding obstacle with grant awarding bodies focusing all their attention on Covid recovery schemes, meaning that new development such as a visitor centre are a hard sell in the present environment. Prior to Covid a key funding focus had been connecting with nature, a priority which Laxton was ideally placed to meet. Funding priorities may change moving to carbon education or the green recovery. Planning would depend on the grant profile and the inevitable time constraints attendant on working with partners such as NCC and the funding process. A realistic estimate was three to five years.
17. The potential location for a new visitor centre – Mr Pierrepont explained that the vision was something of sufficient size to incorporate good size classrooms, a museum, shop and possibly a café. The plans would need to include a back up site and a back up to the back to keep all options open. The trust would be looking to use an existing underused building but Mr Pierrepont would not be drawn on where in particular. Mr Pierrepont was asked about the potential to use the village hall which is underused which he indicated could be discussed with the parish council. However, the intention is to have a permanent display rather than constantly packing and unpacking a display. His vision is of a single visitor and education centre. He was asked about how the focus would be maintained on the tenanted farms which were the main draw for any visitors. In response, he stated that a new visitor centre would bring in income funds which could then be invested. The funding for the development will come from outside sources. The trust is looking to replicate the success of Cresswell Crags but needs the funding to achieve that. In order to do this successfully, the trust has to be guided by the organisations with the money, NCC and Visit England. Flexibility in the planning and site will be essential to get the funding bid over the line. Mr Pierrepont agreed that parking would be required. Whilst parking for the visitor centre is adequate now, it is not heavily visited. A resident observed that, if the car park is full because of the visitor centre, it puts off customers. Mr Pierrepont stated that a new centre would need a proper car park which would have to be a green field which would be controversial but necessary.
18. The education sector to be served by a new visitor centre – This would be primary because that sector naturally aligned with the subject of nature. However, the centre would also serve the secondary and tertiary sector, affording the opportunity to study geography and history. In addition, there was a close link with university education because of the research and agriculture opportunities afforded by the Laxton estate. The trust had been actively developing these links with Sutton Bonington and Nottingham Trent University but Covid had brought these to a halt as face to face teaching had ceased entirely. Now that this has returned, the development of these links is back on the to do list and will be key to the success of the project.
19. Signs designated areas as of specific scientific interest - These had been erected to help reduce the problem of inconsiderate parking. The siting of these signs had proven controversial but had been provided without directions as to where they should be located. The real issue was Main Street and the trust will be enhancing the signage there.
20. The football field as visitor centre location as suggested by one resident – This was likely to prove controversial. The trust will consult with the parish council when it identifies particular sites. The first priority will be to establish to a funding body why the centre is needed, the benefits it will bring and why it should attract the funding. Once

the funding has been secured, the trust will look at the specific site plan and proposals in conjunction with a design company and the parish council. There would be no discussion of sites at this stage.

21. How those involved in education and teaching will be involved in the planning – Mr Pierrepont has had initial informal discussions with the Perlethorpe centre manager. If significant funding is secured, the trust will need to involve those who design and build such facilities for a living.
22. The open fields – These are the main focus. A successful visitor centre would help subsidise Laxton and underpin its future prosperity. New tenants will be required to have a second business which would help achieve a realistic rent. The open fields will require tenant farmers with viable secondary businesses which are historically appropriate. Arable farming is notoriously difficult so an alternative but complimentary income stream would be essential. Mr Pierrepont gave livestock, horses, pedigree sheep and using farm produce in some way as examples of side businesses which were absolutely agriculture focused and therefore acceptable.
23. Life tenancies for new tenants – The trust would be granting these because life tenants have the motivation and incentive to invest and commit. Concern regarding the court leet's powers of compulsion were raised. Mr Pierrepont expressed the view that there was scope for it to take action where the manorial court or open fields are not being supported.
24. What part Thoresby House Farm would have in helping Laxton farmers – The Thorsby House Farm is a large operation and it is not looking to come into Laxton and farm the Laxton estate as it farms in Kneesall and Kersall. Indeed, the trust's preference is to keep the two separate. That said, the Thoresby House Farm manager would be cooperative if the Laxton farms needed support although Mr Pierrepont is keen to maintain a distance between the operations and avoid any suggestion of puppet farming. There had been a concern that the Thoresby Estate would do that. That has never been the intention and he does not want to give those with concerns any ammunition.
25. Modern farming techniques and machinery do not fit with the open field system – The Thoresby estate is well aware that this is a problem. The trustees would not want to be dictatorial but, working with the court leet, Laxton will evolve as it has over the centuries. This evolution needs to be led by the court leet and the manorial court will be the key driver.

Residents observed that the tension between modern machinery and the open field system it was getting to the stage where farmers are unable to farm with the available machinery. This was coupled with the additional issue of finance. The people who are able to farm can be found but they are not able to afford to do so. All Laxton farmers have secondary incomes to support the uneconomic open fields. It was suggested that the situation could become so acute that the trust had to pay the tenants.

Mr Pierrepont assured the meeting that that was not his plan. However, he recognised that making a living from the open fields in the present conditions at the prevailing prices was nearing impossible. For this reason, he wants to work with tenants to develop all on farm income streams which integrate with and support the open field system. The onus must be with the farmers to evolve these incomes issues and come up with constructive proposals which the trustees are able seriously to consider and support where appropriate. The Laxton estate is a tenanted estate and it is the tenants who need to take the lead.
26. The inefficiency of the open fields and the weight of trustees' undertaking to Parliament to support them cannot be passed on to tenants – Mr Pierrepont accepted that this is for the trustees to carry but schemes had to be ones which the tenants want and are able to deliver.
27. How thirteen farms will be able to find thirteen on farm businesses – Mr Pierrepont assured the meeting that trustees would ensure the tenants and the tenants' farms but they need to find those with the entrepreneurial drive to develop businesses. There is a limit to what the trustees are able to do.

Residents commented that there is a limit on how many businesses Laxton is able to support. Mr Pierrepont responded that the most recent tenancy incorporated an activity which was not directly related to Laxton but which provided employment. More businesses will bring more employment opportunities.

He went on to add that the preference is for a long term commitment from tenants. However, it is a balance of multiple factors. If a potential tenant was very impressive but might move on elsewhere that would be a difficult decision. These were not things which could be decided in advance and trustees will not be prescriptive.

28. Recognition of the significant number of residents who are not part of the Laxton estate and need to engage them in any plans to increase visitors – A resident suggested a village woodland to engage the rest of the community. Mr Pierrepont gave the example of Perlethorpe where there is an active group who work and plan together to maintain and enhance the appearance of the village. He recognised that, as established institutions, the parish council and visitor centre were the obvious representative groups to talk to and woodland would work well with ELMs. Permission would be required to alter the landscape with significant tree planting but there are one or two spots with difficult access or poor ground which could be used for trees.
29. The children's visits already successfully run by the History Society which is a village organisation – All are welcome to help
30. The small number of school trips since Covid 19 and lack of any guarantee that they will come back – Mr Pierrepont observed that good facilities would be key in restoring and increasing numbers. Prior to Covid 19 there was a lot of focus on the green recovery and connection with nature. He expressed the view that the Laxton estate had much more to offer than the Civil War Museum in Newark.
31. A request from the parish council for support from the trust for planned Christmas 2021 festivities including new Christmas lighting, carol service, refreshments at the Dovecote to bring people together – Mr Pierrepont confirmed that the trust would support with the donation of trees if the number and specification were provided. If any good causes require support they should apply to the charitable trust which manages donations. Mr Pierrepont will send details and the application form to the parish council chair.

The meeting was closed at 8.55 pm.